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ABSTRACT

A survey was administered to 66 department chairs or graduate coordinators, and 418 graduate faculty in 37 master programs and 10 doctoral programs at an urban research university to assess student recruitment strategies, levels of involvement, and philosophy of recruitment. Analysis of responses (by 52 percent of chairs and graduate coordinators and 27 percent of the faculty) suggested that the lack of articulated plans by graduate programs may be the greatest weakness in recruitment activities. Although most (58 percent) indicated that a plan had been implemented for graduate recruitment, 38 percent indicated that no plan existed or they did not know of a plan. Frequent use of the "Don't Know" response by graduate faculty also indicated that faculty are uninformed of their program's recruitment activities. Respondents rated the most frequently used strategies to be brochures, letters, advertisements and phone calls. Individuals most involved in recruitment were graduate coordinators (75 percent), faculty (74 percent) and department chairs (60 percent). However, a substantial number of faculty were uninvolved in their program's recruitment activities. Results also suggest that the recruitment plan should address the lack of funding, faculty and space, a procedure which complicates recruitment efforts. (DB)

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HIGHER EDUCATION AND GRADUATE RECRUITMENT

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ABSTRACT

As the public demands institutions of higher education to be more accountable in the wake of reduced funding and fewer available students, educators must develop ways to continue quality programs. At the graduate level, recruitment is being examined. A survey was administered to chairs, graduate coordinators and graduate faculty in an urban research university to assess recruitment strategies, levels of involvement, and philosophy of recruitment. Results suggest that overall, the lack of an articulated plan was the most hindrance to recruitment efforts.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND GRADUATE STUDENT RECRUITMENT

For the last several decades, institutions of higher education have been relatively free of external environmental constraints. The lofty "ivory tower" image held by society sheltered institutions from change. A climate of free thought and expression coupled with the noble pursuit of knowledge placed institutions of higher education in the unique position of elitetism. Following the post World War II era, student populations enlarged, federal aid expanded, higher education costs remained stable, and tax payers philosophically embraced the aims of higher education. However, dramatic changes began taking place in the 1980s. Environmental factors, previously taken for granted by institutions of higher education, could no longer be assumed to exist with the robustness of previous years. Reduced funding levels, increased demands for accountability and dismal demographic projections began to pierce the "ivory tower" image. The challenge was now to do more with less, e.g., less in terms of students and less in terms of funding sources, and to do it better.

To cope with the changes, institutions have had to develop survival strategies. With increased competition for students, efforts have intensified in the area of recruitment and retention. The present study assesses the recruitment and retention strategies of graduate programs and the philosophy of graduate faculty toward recruitment in a large urban research university.

Constraints on Higher Education

America's colleges and universities are "living through a revolution. It is as profound a change as that which crushed the early nineteenth-century world of tiny religious colleges and created the new era of universities, state land-grant colleges, graduate schools, coeducation, research, deans, and postgraduate education for the professional classes at the turn of the century" (Keller, 1983, p. viii). How well institutions fare in the face of such challenges will depend on their adaptability and commitment to changes in their economical, political and social environments.

Of the several challenges that exist, perhaps none is more daunting than the reduction in the traditional student population pool. Demographic projections for the 1990s indicate, "...there will be one-fifth fewer high school graduates, which means greater competition for a decreasing number of college candidates" (Cyert, 1983, p. vi). Correspondingly, candidates at the graduate level will become fewer as the cycle progresses upward. Although not declining as yet, Syverson (1995) indicates that the total graduate enrollment increase of one percent from 1993 to 1994 continues the "slowdown in enrollment growth that began in 1993" (p. 6). Upon closer examination, graduate enrollment shows increases for some groups and decreases for others. Specifically, women continue to outnumber men; international student enrollment has begun to decrease following several years of rapid growth; and trends by fields of study indicate growth in some but decline in others. For example, graduate enrollment in the health sciences and education increased but enrollments in business, engineering and the physical sciences were continuing to decrease (Syverson, 1995).

Besides the economic challenge that fewer enrollments present to higher education budgets, institutions must also grapple with reduced federal and business support. House (1994)

suggests several factors are present. Previously, federal research had been "military-oriented" with universities supplying the "research and technical manpower for the defense industry" (p. 27). However, with the end of the Cold War and the downsizing of the military federal support for research funding is being reduced. In view of the amount of funds involved, a reduction in federal support at the graduate level is problematic. In the research and development area alone the federal government "...spent $18.67 for each elementary and secondary student, $619 for each undergraduate student, and $2008 for each graduate student. When funding is added from other federal agencies, one can see that the impact of federal priorities on higher education has been tremendous" (p. 28). Furthermore, economic and political discussions associated with balanced budget issues and reduced grant funding have resulted in the federal government passing more costs on to states. States, in turn have shifted $7.7 billion in costs to institutions who raised tuition to partially offset economic pressures. Federal funding has also been reduced in the area of financial aid to students. Less aid is available at a time when the expense of a higher education is increasing. In the business sector employment opportunities for graduates have diminished as the global community has expanded and businesses have opted for better financial opportunities abroad. As businesses focus more internationally, less support is provided for higher education. Finally, issues of accountability are no longer confined to elementary and secondary education. Public and legislative bodies are demanding institutions of higher education to be more responsible in all areas among which are time-to-degree, faculty work loads and fiscal matters.

These economic changes accompanied with a reduced pool of traditional aged students have placed institutions in a scramble for survival. Awareness of the complexity of the challenge has increased. "Facing increased costs and diminished revenues, most institutions are again

coming to understand just how intertwined questions of finance and program have always been" (Pew Higher Education Roundtable, p. 2). Recruitment and retention of students becomes imperative. Traditionally, formal recruitment activities of institutions have been limited to the undergraduate population whereas, graduate recruitment has typically been through the efforts of professors and programs. The centralized/decentralized approach is being altered as institutions assume more of an active role in the coordination of graduate recruitment. Active recruitment requires change not only in policy and process but also in philosophy. For example, Bryant (1994) suggests that graduate faculty often do not perceive themselves to be recruiters, particularly faculty who have been in higher education since the 1970s when students flocked to campuses across the nation.

In summary, institutions of higher education are being challenged to adapt to constraints in their external environment. Changes in federal funding, higher education costs and the prospects of fewer enrollments are causes for concern. One survival strategy adopted by many institutions is the recruitment of students. Thus, graduate education must address efforts to maintain enrollments as demographic changes impact the life of higher education institutions.

METHODOLOGY

To provide an initial assessment of graduate recruitment and retention activities and strategies of a large urban research university, a survey was mailed to 66 department chairs and graduate coordinators and 418 graduate faculty in 37 master programs and 10 doctoral programs. A semi-structured format included a basic set of twelve questions about recruitment strategies, types of involvement, targeted populations, retention efforts and space for comments. Multiple responses and comments were encouraged for most of the questions. For example, one question

asked respondents to check any recruitment strategies used by their program from a list of 12 potential strategies and to list other strategies they used. A category was also provided for respondents to check if they were unable to respond due to lack of information. Surveys to chairs and graduate coordinators were expanded to include a larger section for comments as well as three additional questions about the availability of resources for graduate recruitment. It was deemed that the centrality of their position allowed for more ready access to budgetary data. Moreover, further elaboration was encouraged since chairs and coordinators usually have more frequent contact with prospective graduate students as well as more responsibility for departmental planning. Finally, interviews were conducted with six deans and three administrators for a view of recruitment and retention at an even more central level of involvement. Percentages and ratings were used to analyze the structured component of the survey. Comments and interview responses were systematically categorized.

RESULTS

Results of the survey provide a glimpse of the present graduate recruitment activities as well as insights for the future. Surveys were completed by 52 percent of the chairs and graduate coordinators and 27 percent of the graduate faculty. All graduate programs were represented. Table 1 presents the most prominent findings of the survey.

The data suggest that the lack of an articulated plan by every graduate program may be the greatest weakness in the recruitment activities. Although a majority (58 percent) of the respondents indicated that a plan had been implemented for graduate recruitment, 38 percent indicated that no plan existed or they did not know of a plan. Lack of a plan was further reflected when no focus was indicated for targeting specific geographical areas and specific groups. For

example, local (61 percent), regional (52 percent) and national (53 percent) emphasis received almost equal responses. Likewise, no specific group was targeted. When examined by college, data were consistent with only one exception. Only in one college, in which respondents (68 percent) indicated a plan had been implemented, indicated that their efforts were focused locally (76 percent) and to a minority population (76 percent).

Another indication of the lack of an articulated plan was the percentage of "Don't Know" responses from graduate faculty across all questions. Data suggest that faculty are uninformed of their program's recruitment activities. Chairs and graduate coordinators never marked the category.

In the qualitative analysis lack of a plan was the most frequently mentioned category. Respondents often used words like "haphazard," "sporadic" and "not very systematic" when they provided further information about their department's recruitment activities. Summarized by one respondent, "The department's efforts are obviously poor, uncoordinated, and ineffective."

The survey also examined recruitment strategies. When asked about 12 strategies, respondents rated the most frequently used strategies to be brochures, letters, advertisements and phone calls. However, when responding to the ones they were more frequently involved in, respondents indicated letters, phone calls and recruiting at conferences. Coupled with the qualitative comments, the data suggest that involvement varies from passive to active. Programs that rely primarily on word of mouth, reputation and "only recruit to those that inquire" have a more passive recruitment strategy reflective of a status quo philosophy. Markets are not analyzed and curriculums are not updated. On the other hand, programs that are developing community visibility, involved in international agreements and creating new markets of students have a more

active recruitment strategy reflective of a proactive philosophy. They are going to the students instead of waiting for students to come to them.

Involvement was a third component of the survey. A rating of the most involved individuals included graduate coordinators (75 percent), faculty (74 percent) and department chairs (60 percent). Others perceived to be involved, but to a much lessor degree, were graduate students (26 percent), alumni (17 percent) and support staff (12 percent). When respondents were asked to compare their level of involvement in recruitment to the involvement of others, not surprisingly, 46 percent perceived that they were much more involved than others in recruitment activities. One area of concern, however, is the 25 percent who indicated they were much less involved, not involved, didn't know or provided no response to the question. Thus, a substantial number of faculty are not active in the recruitment of a graduate program.

As a component of recruitment, retention efforts were also surveyed. Primarily, data suggest that faculty advisors (70 percent) were the most frequently used method for retention purposes followed by a more limited use of mentors (22 percent). One respondent stated, "Our problem is not recruitment. Our problem is retention, perhaps because so many are admitted."

Additional insights about graduate recruitment activities were provided by 52 percent of the respondents in which recruitment efforts vary from programs working hard with little success to programs who have all the students they can handle without any recruitment. Emphasis was placed on the need for an articulated, comprehensive plan, as indicated above. Five areas were categorized: (1) emphasis on retention, (2) student oriented, (3) strong placement program, (4) target populations, and (5) proactive program development. Proactive program development is described in terms of expanding and changing programs to meet new needs of society and

students. Have a good gram, keep curriculum current with the times and consider the needs of students, e.g., time and ce of course offerings, etc. As one respondent summarized it,

> "Students have c oices. It is important to determine, then promote, those attributes of one's program that are key to the students' decision. This requires knowing what students want and need, often by segment. Up front research can pay off. Generalized promotion activity that is not targeted to specific needs of specific segments of students does more harm than good..."

Hindrances to successful recruiting were also mentioned. Besides lack of a plan, lack of money, faculty and space were seen to restrict and confine any efforts aimed at recruiting graduate students. Lack of money to fund graduate assistantships and/or increase stipends was repeated many times over in the comments. Respondents indicated a level of frustration in that the assistantships they had to offer were too few and the stipend levels were not competitive. Others indicated lack of faculty and space to be a major hindrance. Recruiting more students in the face of a dwindling faculty and limited space placed serious constraints on the program.

Philosophically, respondents differed in their opinions on two issues in particular: recruitment of their own undergraduates and admission standards. Some programs perceived their undergraduate students to be a great avenue for increased enrollment while others indicated they encouraged their undergraduate students to go elsewhere for graduate school. For example, "We should actively pursue and inform our better undergraduate students about our graduate programs" as contrasted to "It is better for your program and for the students if your own undergraduate are not recruited to the graduate program." A similar contrasting view is indicated with regards to admission standards. One respondent stated, "Given an opportunity, people may

fail. But, I think we should be generous in our admission policies." Another adamantly stated, "Do NOT lower standards to attract/retain more students!!! This is ultimately self-defeating, and cheapens the work and degrees of earlier students. (respondent's emphasis)."

Interviews with the deans reflected size and number of the graduate programs as a factor in the recruitment of students from the college level. Results, consistent with previous research (Bryant, 1987) indicate that (a) deans supported recruitment activities from the college level if the college was composed of a few graduate programs and/or small graduate enrollments and (b) deans were knowledgeable about the college level efforts. In contrast, deans with numerous graduate programs or large graduate enrollments had (a) left recruitment activities to departments and (b) were less informed about the recruitment activities of departments.

CONCLUSION

Although a majority of graduate programs are involved in recruitment, the lack of an articulated plan is a hindrance. Numerous comments about the need for a plan and focus of activities indicate that either plans are not well communicated or that plans are not well developed. Further efforts in this area should be addressed since an untapped reserve of faculty (25 percent) are not actively participating in graduate recruitment. Faculty are also less knowledgeable, less inclined to provide comments and less inclined to answer open ended questions than were department chairs and graduate coordinators. Moreover, a plan needs to address the lack of funding, faculty and space which complicate the efforts of recruitment.

Only tentative conclusions can be made of the findings due to a lower than anticipated response rate. Follow-up procedures were prohibited when a natural disaster in the area affected the university and its respondents. Also, the findings must be viewed in that all graduate

programs, both master and doctoral, were assessed in the survey. Based on the findings, a clearer assessment of graduate recruitment efforts would be obtained if the two levels were examined separately. Strategies and philosophies appear to differ across master and doctoral levels.

Overall, external constraints on higher education continue to impact graduate enrollments in the mid 1990s. To survive programs must articulate a plan for recruitment. Programs should move from the more passive recruitment activities of previous years to more active recruitment strategies of the present. Recruitment needs, however, run the continuum. Some programs are recruiting diligently with limited results while other programs recruit minimally but have "all the students than can handle." Thus, plans must be specific to a program although coordination of efforts may be more institutional than in previous years.

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Table 1

Graduate Recruitment Survey Results

A recruitment plan had been implemented:
yes (58%), no (21%), don't know (17%)
Most frequently used recruitment strategies (from a list of 12):
brochures (77%), letters, (43%), advertisements (41%), phone calls (40%)
Respondent's listing of their involvement in recruiting (from a list of 12):
letters (40%), phone calls (39%), conferences (39%)
Respondent's perception of their level of involvement as compared to others:
much more involved (46%), about the same (29%), less involved to no response (25%)
Perception of who were the most involved individuals in recruiting (from a list of 6):
graduate coordinators (75%), faculty (74%), chairs (60%)
Retention strategies used by programs (from a list of 6):
faculty advisors (70%), mentors (22%)
Targeted populations:
no specific group (38%), ethnic minorities (33%), internationals (20%)
Targeted geographical areas:
local (61%), regional (52%), national (53%)
Graduate assistants:
avg. # of assistantships per department - 5.5
Funding for recruitment:
general funds - 82%, grants and contracts - 36%